

THE JUNKMAN

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The black sky is freckled with stars tonight. It's one of the city council's more convincing holograms. Normally I couldn't give a shit which projection they decide to paste over the ceiling of pollution. It's nothing but a reminder of the dough they keep pumping into that atmospheric art project, while the streets are piling up with chemheads and the recently deceased, and I'm still driving around a cruiser I pieced together with spare parts and my own sweat. But tonight after processing a personal record of six bodies, seeing something up there other than a coming monsoon, or a blanket of mud brown smog, is comforting.

I'm driving downtown, trying to kill time 'til my shift is up. The rain has died off, along with all but the seediest of shops' lights. I'm just about to sign off, pull the cruiser into the garage, when I feel a slight vibration at the side of my skull.

I flinch instinctively before it comes, still not used to the invasive scan chip rattling my temporal lobe. The crackling staccato of the dispatcher echoes around my skull for a while before my subconscious can translate the scanner's transmission out of binary. "J-690 at Sector 7B is requesting a Junkman verification." Showtime.

I flip the siren just for kicks, and whip my cruiser hard left. The back wheels spin on the slick rain-licked concrete as I slide into the opposite lane, the rubber squealing and screeching. I slam down on the accelerator and the engine kicks into overdrive, pinning me back to the seat. The night pulsates with the red and yellow of my hood-beams and I see heads whip around as I rumble down the complex circuit of back-alleys and side roads that only a Shield or a Junkman would know. The streetwalkers and chemheads click off those Holo-visors that hover over their eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of the Junkman makin' all the noise. I leave them in a cloud of exhaust that wouldn't even pass an emissions test in Hong Kong. Not that anyone cares anymore.

Two Shields are already on the scene as I skid to a stop outside an alleyway across from a virtual adult playhouse with a flickering, red neon sign. There are only a couple sectors of the city that have their

crime rate down to the national average. Sector 7 sure as hell ain't one of them.

Their bikes are propped near each other outside the alley. I roll my eyes. Only two Shields I know are vain enough to work on rockets after a monsoon. They're the type that chug pouches of soy-protein isolate and pump iron between shifts.

"Evening Detective Yokomoto, Detective Rodriguez," I say as I step out wearing a smile so bright Rodriguez does a double take.

"Evening Dick," Rodriguez says, half turning in my direction. My name is Richard Decker, or Junkman as I prefer when I'm on the job, but these guys don't like me much. They know they can't do what I do and their pride takes a hit every time they have to call me in.

"What do we got tonight boys?" I ask, fishing out my SynthWand from the back seat.

"Well, Dick, possible homicide, possible improper disposal of electronics, you tell us. This is supposed to be your job, right?" Rodriguez says, crossing a couple of over-inflated balloons that he insists on calling arms. He opens his mouth to speak, closes it, then casts a sidelong look at his partner. "Although you might want to fire up that compressor. Looks pretty open-shut to me. She's definitely wired."

"Well how about you leave the diagnosis to the professionals," I say, cracking the tension from my knuckles and neck. "As you said, this is *my* job, eh big guy?" I laugh and smack him on the back. He doesn't crack a smile, just watches me, his muscles bulging in agitation. He tosses another glance at Yokomoto.

As I make my way to the body, I nod a greeting at Yokomoto who's standing near his Kawasaki 1700. His visor is over his eyes, muttering voice commands, not even willing to spare me a nod of recognition. He's not built like an action figure like Rodriguez, but his cheekbones, nose and chin are in such perfect proportion it looks like he's wearing a fine mask instead of a face. He's always creeped me out, an impressive achievement in my line of work.

As I shoulder past Rodriguez, who makes little effort to ease my passing, I see that this one is a "she" and still fresh. The body is slumped against some old graffiti in the opening of the alley, the head lolled down against the chest, the chin resting a few inches above a fist sized hole, some kind of entry wound. I take a step closer and crouch down on my toes to examine the body. I survey her, take in the whole picture before zooming in on the important details.

I figure she must've died while out on a jog. She is head to foot in spandex-lycra. A hot pink pair of those new microchip Nikes, the ones all those athletes wear to track their vitals, are kicked out, duck-footed and awkward. Toned muscles bulge beneath the tight fabric. Her body would send even the sexiest movie starlet scrambling to the nearest mod-shop for another upgrade. Her jet black hair is done up in a ponytail, wrapped around her shoulder, the end pasted against the wound between the peaks of her breasts.

The body is too far from a street light to get a good look, and the hologrammed stars look pretty but are shit for luminescence. I fish around the pockets of my rain-slick and snap on my glasses. They're cheap infrared and only useful in the shadows of alleyways; too much light or pitch black and they're useless—though it's still less risk and less creds than getting an eye shine.

As I slide in close there's no gagging and no flinching, because to me, Junk is just junk. I've been that way since my first corpse. Six years-old, and Uncle Larry takes me out for a day at the park. He stops pushing my swing. He's coughing, spitting blood and tar on the barked playground floor. Reaches for me, chokes out my name between lung tissue expulsions. His eyes fade from the Uncle Larry I know and fill with something entirely different. I witness his soul depart. It was the damndest thing I'd ever seen.

A "morbid curiosity" is what the counselor wrote in her file after I got caught diggin' through my neighbor's dead cat, taking out the interesting parts and saving them in my lunchbox for future examinations. They wanted me in an institution, but now they rely on my "morbid curiosity" to keep the Junk off the streets. As soon as they discovered I could accurately pinpoint for them the exact minute the soul leaves a body, they no longer called me a freak. They called me Junkman. Typical bureaucracy. Everything different is a threat until you can figure how it pads the budget.

With my specs on, I get a good look at the wound. The flesh at the entry point has been shredded like raw beef, little white bits of bone mixed in with the mess. Fluids, both bodily and hydraulic, leak like a faucet and drain into a narrow crack in the concrete. I lift my specs; wink my right eye to snap a picture. I make sure to store it into the external drive blinking at my hip before returning to the body.

I don't bother trying to work out the cause of death. That's not what I do. I'm the Junkman; I specialize in the verification, collection,

removal and disposal of the formerly human, recently deceased. I don't deal in motives or circumstances. Though it doesn't take a detective to tell this one took a flechette round to the chest. Why? I don't know, and I don't care. Not my job.

I hear Rodriguez groan behind me as I dive my hands right between the breasts and feel around in the goop for something artificial. I get my thumb and forefinger pinched around something too hard and flexible to be natural and, after some squirming, wrestle it into view. It's a reflex wire, an upgrade generally used by anyone looking to get an extra step in a physical competition, where a half-second of reaction time could make all the difference.

I tug it like a sweater string until I have a good three inches to work with outside the body. I blink a quick pic and then wipe the hot fluid from the synthetic myelin sheath to get a look at the manufacturer's code. I can't interpret the code, but I've been working long enough to know the signatures. I shake my head as I pick out a stretch of code that Marty down at the BetterU mod shop is likely to use. Marty caters to the power hungry crowd. He also mods you over the limit if you've got the cash. Shields haven't shut him down yet, and they probably never will. Too much profit to be made off the kick-backs.

"We figure she's involved in some political movement, killed by Organix," Rodriguez says, offering information I didn't ask for.

"What makes you say that?" I don't take my eyes off the body. I don't like being interrupted when I'm working.

"Call it Shield intuition. Or maybe it's because she's out dressed up like that in the middle of the night, wired like a fucking Christmas tree. She's either involved in some wire junkie movement or plain stupid. Either way it's not the city's concern." He's spouting city approved propaganda, and I don't entirely disagree with it.

"Hey, I hear ya," I say. "We still got to do our job though. Earn our pay and all that?" I hear him shift uncomfortably behind me. "Just because the city is going to hell doesn't mean we can just overlook the law."

I hear him mutter something under his breath, but I don't really care what he says. Not my job.

I stuff the wire back into the chest and take the skull in both hands. I tilt the dead weight up to meet me. Her cheeks are pale and hard beneath my hands, like some mannequin's flesh. The rigidity suggests nanostimulation of the fibers in the reticular layer of skin,

gone hard after the brain snuffed out and stopped sending the fibers electronic impulses. Another modification added to the list. Maybe I should have warmed up the Junker after all.

I find the vacant blue eyes with mine and bore into them, searching. From the outside it probably looks like we're about to kiss. What I'm doing though, is tapping into the being behind the parts. When I lock eyes, nothing else exists. I can get history; past pains and humiliations, shame and joy—the little things that separate our species from matter. I can get all that from flecks of color in the iris, the black hue of the retina, the branches of red veins reaching like fingers from inside the socket. But if there's too much noise, too much interference in my vision, I know that this dripping pile is nothing more than the sum of its bleeding parts.

I'm crouched, searching the eyes for ten minutes or ten seconds, I can't tell, when my breath catches in my throat and I drop the head like I've just been bit. I rock back onto my heels and have to put my hand in the puddle of fluid for support. I'm panting a little, utterly shaken. I *know* this person...this thing, whatever. Or I knew her. Cindy Oroman. It's been maybe twenty years since I was in grade school but I never forget a pair of eyes, especially not a pair of gold-flecked beauties like Cindy's. She looks nothing like the chubby cheeked tomboy I knew. Her cheekbones look higher, and her body is carved out of marble. No one can change who they are though. Not really.

"What's the matter, Dick? She bite?" Rodriguez says.

I push myself steady, wiping my hand on my coveralls. "Who called this in?"

"Anonymous. No one wants to do the paperwork." He scratches the back of his buzzed head. "And I don't blame them, either. Now are you finished here? Can we get back to doing our fucking jobs?"

"What do we know about her?" I'm struggling to keep my dirty vocal cords from giving away my anxiety. "The body, I mean."

"Her?" Rodriguez says, suspicious. I've never asked this before. He doesn't say anything for a moment, but when I don't break eye contact, he rolls his eyes and concedes.

"Cindy Oroman. Some runner from Seattle registered in the marathon. Like I said, she's connected to the Perfect Athletes Association, so she could be a radical. But more importantly, what the hell do you care?"

"Just curious," I say, but I can't help but wonder who did this

to her. Was she a radical coming here to take on the Organix, or was she just here to compete in the marathon? If she's just a runner, why kill her? It doesn't make sense, but it doesn't matter. Motives are for murders, and there was still no confirmation that Cindy Oroman was murdered. Brutally killed, no doubt, but murder is human. Cindy still might not be.

"For the love of—," Yokomoto mutters, his accent thick. "It's not your job to be curious. Yeah?"

He's got me there. I shouldn't let anything throw me off. So what if I knew her? I'm the Junkman and that's not my job. I snap back to earth, flick the wand from my belt and click off the safety.

As I insert the metallic tip into the chest cavity, I can't get her out of my mind. It's like searching my own eyes, unable to unsee these pointless, stupid memories. They hit me in waves. I remember her as the tomboy athlete. I remember her bloodying my nose in dodgeball. Remember her laughing at me with everyone else, calling me freak. She was talented, effortlessly beautiful. My first crush. I saw her once in high school, when our schools competed. Her parents had just been indicted for selling internal firmware. She looked so much different. Focused, I guess. Never would have guessed she'd be modded out, draining in an alleyway.

Junk is just junk, I say to myself, *whether you know the heap of circuits or not*. I thumb the button and the wand releases a small EMP, igniting the circuitry and creating an electrical map of the body. Once complete, I yank it out, a gush of fluid releasing with it. I take a last look at Cindy's perfectly sculpted body before I check the results of the scan. I look at the wand but my vision is blurred. The numbers look like smears seen through the wrong end of a telescope. Everything suddenly feels so real.

I do my best to focus on the results. This reading will give me the raw data. All the SynthWand really does is read the body and arrange a percentage based on how much of the tissue is natural and how much is artificial, based on the elemental breakdown. It's as close as science can get to measuring humanity. Which is to say, not close enough.

The screen at the base of the wand has the verdict: 64% inorganic material. A goddamn superhuman. Cindy is, at least technically, Junk. I shouldn't care. *I don't* care. But I know I'm slipping because I suddenly gasp in oxygen I hadn't realized I was keeping from my lungs.

The wand has a margin of error, of course. Just because it says

Junk doesn't necessarily make it so. There's a physical transformation that happens at over 50%, the body relying more on the implants to function, but the spiritual threshold is different. The moment a soul begins to fade into the wires is a tricky thing to peg down, even for me. At 64%, I don't have much hope for her, but the one thing I know for certain is that the soul can't be measured with a machine.

So I look again into those familiar blue eyes and try to disappear into them. But before I can even blink I know it's futile, too much noise. I curse under my breath. I can't tell if the noise is all those aftermarket parts she's stuffed with, or my own memories. Every time I look at her all I see is the only girl that I ever liked at that shit excuse for a school.

"Well?" Rodriguez asks. He thinks all I do is wave my wand and wait for it to do a trick.

"I don't know," I say, shaking my head. "I...I can't get a clear reading." My stomach is in knots and I want nothing more than to get in my cruiser and gun it from this alley. Rodriguez throws his hands in the sky and mouths something I can only assume is an insult.

"Do you know what your job is, Dick? Do you?" Rodriguez is staring at me, his hands on his hips, talking down at me like I'm some kid who's about to be sent to his room.

"I'm the Junkman," I say, standing to meet his gaze. I don't know where he's going with this, but I'll be damned if I'm going to take it. "I specialize in the verification, collection, removal and—," he cuts me off with a snort of laughter.

"Is that really what you think?" Rodriguez asks. He looks to Yokomoto and they both shake their heads. My blood starts to boil.

"No, no, no. See, you're only here because we got more dead bodies than we got police and the city is hemorrhaging money. So it's your job to stick that thing in the corpse," He points at the SynthWand still dripping with Cindy's fluid, "take it out and tell us not to investigate. That's it." He makes a sweeping motion with his hand, suggesting finality.

"No. See, you're wrong." My hands are clenched into fists and I'm gripping the wand like a Shield's bat, ready to strike. I dig in my pocket and whip out my badge. "This means it's my job to verify whether or not the inorganic has robbed the body of humanity. I find souls, Rody. That's my job, and I'm fucking great at it."

"What is this? You are serious?" Yokomoto swings a leg onto his bike but doesn't start it. "What a freak."

“Yoko,” Rodriguez says, turning. “Why don’t you go handle that 020 that just got called in, and me and Mr. Decker here will finish up our conversation.” Yoko smiles a tiny, plastic smile, kick starts his bike, and tears off under the artificial sky. Rodriguez, Cindy and I are left alone in the alley. Rain begins to fall.

“Listen to me, Dick,” Rodriguez says with renewed passion. “You’re nothing more than a convenient way to lighten the case load. You’re a budget loophole, an accounting trick.” A vein across his forehead pulsates, he grinds his teeth. He looks down at me and his voice elevates a few decibels, quivering with lost control.

“Except we’ve gotten six calls since we’ve been standing here, waiting on you.” He takes out his badge and holds it under my nose. It’s a golden shield, about twice the size of my small, green Junkman ID. “I don’t have time for your bullshit, so I’ll ask you this one time nicely. What does the wand say?” I swallow a lump in my throat. I look from Rodriguez to Cindy lying on the pollution stained concrete, her skin as pale as porcelain, her hair as black as coal. Her eyes clouded by death, but clearly beautiful.

“It’s not...I make the final call,” I brush the shield away from my face, take a deep breath, harden my eyes. “And I say she’s human.” Rodriguez’s lips flatten into a hard line. His artificially enhanced musculature stretches his shirt to the seams. His face is shining, his sweat glands working overdrive trying to keep up with the heat generated from his mods. Both of us at full height, I notice for the first time that Rodriguez towers over me. It’s like standing next to a brick wall.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, Dick,” His words are slow and stained with contempt. He takes a step towards me, his badge is gone and now his hand rests on the butt of his pistol. His eyes bore into mine, and in them I see nothing but Anadrol-fueled rage. “Reviews are up at the end of the week, and the city is broke. They’re going to be slashing. So I’ll just come right and tell you that I don’t need some dead piece of junk in yet another pending file. So, I’ll tell you what you’re going to do. It’s very simple: You’re going to do your fucking job, or I will do it for you.”

I say nothing. He shakes his head, steps up, and slams his oversized fist into my solar plexus. It feels like I’ve been hit by a sledgehammer, and I know instantly a rib is cracked. Rodriguez leans down close, his mouth inches from my ear. I hear the safety click off, his pistol whirrs

to life.

“Appliances burn out, they break, get over it.”

I don’t think. My hand holding the wand lashes out, strikes Rodriguez across the face. He stumbles back, rattled. I stab the wand in his gaping mouth. He tries to draw his pistol but I kick out with my left foot, smash his fingers against the grip. His cry of pain comes out garbled around the Synth wand. I push him back against the side of my cruiser.

“Maybe you’re right,” I wheeze. “Maybe I don’t have power, maybe I’m useless. And you’re right, she’s not human. But I’ll let *you* in on a little secret: I don’t give a fuck anymore.” I click the safety off of the wand. I want to pull the gun from his belt and end this forever, but I restrain myself. I’ll just give him something to remember. “You may feel a little shock.” I thumb the button, the EMP releases and Rodriguez begins to convulse, slow twitching like an insect burning at the wrong end of a magnifying glass. He drops to my feet, shaved head squeaking as it slides down my cruiser’s passenger door.

My wand beeps, it has Rodriguez’s map. Something is wrong, smoke drifts from his open mouth, as he lies slack-jawed. His map is lit up like a city grid. Then I notice the firmware implants in his cortex. Son of a bitch was wired—and not just glandular steroid or reflex wiring—his goddamn brain was an electronics expo. The EMP must’ve shorted it, fried him. I killed him. I killed a Shield.

For a moment I am numb. Then my world begins to crash around me. My job, my life, is over. Forfeit. All for some stupid, modded-out girl I don’t even know anymore. Some dead girl. My knees buckle and I lean on the cruiser for support.

It’s then that my scan chip rattles. “J-690 we received verification from Officer Yokomoto, we are just waiting on the compressor confirmation on your end.” There’s no way out now. They’ll need a body. They’ll need forms of consent, need the data collected. Later they’ll need Rodriguez’s statement. I have to do the right thing. Cindy is over, she made a mistake, and it is my job to make sure she pays according to the law.

I fire up the compressor. I heave the body, now wet with rain, in the back and watch as it’s zipped down, drained of juice and compacted into a two-by-two cube. It comes out steaming and smooth. I am disgusted for the first time. The process has never bothered me before now.

I call in. "This is J-256, Junkman, coming in with #4456, compressed and ready for processing."

I drive. I'm heading to the station. They wanted a cube, and they're going to get one. But not Cindy's. Cindy is laid out on the back seat, slumped and dripping. She's headed home, to be buried beneath the natural ground. It's so obvious to me the importance of giving back to the earth what we took. She'd already paid her debt; she doesn't deserve an empty, artificial death. She deserves to live on as part of something greater than herself. Rodriguez is going to have to be Cindy for awhile. After I drop him off, I'm out. I know they'll try to track me down, but I won't be hiding. They'll crush me, just like I've crushed so many others, and that's okay. That's what I deserve.

Before me, the sun begins to rise. It's gray and dull and it's framed by jagged, black pixelated lines and looks nothing like a sunrise at all. It's probably the last one I will ever see. I caress Cindy's cold, dead hand and I no longer care that the sky isn't real. Because if I squint hard enough and concentrate, it could be the most beautiful sunrise I've ever seen.